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Shanah Tovah Umetukah! We've done a lot of praying tonight! And guess what - we're going to do a whole bunch more praying together over the next 12 days! I know sometimes we wish our rabbis had written the prayer book more like the lyricist from Fiddler on the Roof. You know the moment - the student asks his rabbi if there's a blessing for the Czar and the rabbi responds... May God bless and keep the Czaaaaarrrrr.... far away from us! End of moment, end of prayer, short, sweet, and to the point.

We don't know how or when humanity started praying. We don't know how or when our earliest ancestors looked to the sky or the river or the mountain or the sun, feeling their smallness in a dangerous world and uttered in response to that fragility a desperate plea for help, for aid, for assistance. Or a parent looking at the new baby in their arms, or a sunset too beautiful for words and in that deep awareness of the unutterable beauty and vulnerability of our lives and our daily small miracles, uttered an expression of gratitude for a thousand unmerited blessings.

What we do know is that, as our species evolved over tens of thousands of years, one of the most ubiquitous and universal human impulses is the act of prayer. At the heart of all prayer is the deep and abiding human awareness of our fragility within a universe of powerful forces that we cannot control. And yet, this impulse of humility is countered by the hubris of humanity that, especially in our modern world, thinks it understands more than it does, that acts with impunity, that believes that somehow we are more powerful than the forces of wind, sun, tide, and water. Fortunately, for us, our Torah is with us to teach us the wisdom of antiquity and to remind us of the truth: that we survive on this planet in delicate balance with everything around us; that we are called on to be stewards of this planet; that when we ignore the obligations of symbiotic balance and stewardship, the planet will remind us of who is more powerful and we will be responsible for our suffering and the suffering of countless creatures who don't deserve what we are doing to them. As God's covenanted partners, we have a sacred obligation to act as loving protectors for this planet and all of the life that shares our small miraculous home. And if the last two centuries have taught us anything, it is that we ignore this obligation to our great peril.

In just a few weeks we'll renew our annual cycle of Torah reading at Simchat Torah and come to my favorite parshah in all of the Five Books - Parshat Bereishit. In it, we read the ancient Jewish vision of the nature of existence and how our ancestors tried to answer the life's big questions - how did we all get here? How did existence come to exist? And what is the purpose of our lives?

Amazingly, Parshat Bereishit offers us answers and these ideas are still compelling for us today. As we explore this concept together however, it is essential to keep in mind, Torah is not a book of science although it contains the scientific thought of our ancient ancestors. It is also not a book of history, although it chronicles many of our historical experiences. Torah is a book of wisdom and communication that largely defies categorization and must not be limited to constricting categories. Too many people in our world look to Parshat Bereishit as a historical and literal truth which condemns a rich and brilliant piece of ancient wisdom to being labeled as a sad, delusion, and quaint fairy tale. Bereishit, Genesis, is anything but delusional and quaint. Within its words are powerful concepts that have the ability to transform our world, our theologies, and our self-understanding. The seven days of creation described in Torah are not

meant to be a replacement for science and scientific discovery and truth. They are meant to convey an ancient awareness of the nature of existence, our place within it.

Torah's opening words are profound. We read, "Bereishit bara Elokim" *in a beginning God created. In A beginning God CREATED.* This verb of bara, meaning to create, is only used in reference to God and the evolution of everything in existence. Our early mystics believed this alluded to the nature of formation of the universe itself. From this single phrase, they imagined that all of existence came into being in one powerful moment of creation. They further noticed that all other kinds of creation use the Hebrew verbs of "asah" meaning to do or to make, or they use the verb "domeh" meaning to form or to shape. From this different usage of the three verbs, these mystical thinkers conceived that all existence, all matter, is just formed energy and that the energy is what God created. They imagined existence as a constant flow between what is formed, what exists, what decays, and then reforms into something new. They innately understood the concepts of energy and matter as being two halves of the same coin. For the vast majority of our ancient rabbis, philosophers, and thinkers, it was unimaginable that we could build a theology that stood in contrast to science, reason, and rationality. Back in the 10th century, Rav Sa'adya Gaon, widely considered to be one of the sharpest Jewish minds in all of Jewish history, wrote a treatise on science and religion. Even back then, Rav Sa'adya, addressed the supposed conflict between science and religion by dismissing those who would have these two great schools of thought and learning be at odds with each other. Instead, he censures the fundamentalists and anti-intellectualists. Rav Sa'adya writes that the Torah is entirely true because he believed it was the transmitted word of God as dictated by God to Moses at Mount Sinai. By today's standards we would consider him to be in the religious fundamentalist camp. But then he defies modern definition by stating that science is also entirely true because it is the enterprise of understanding the laws by which God ordained and maintains existence! He believed in science and understood that it is an undertaking that is always seeking newer and deeper levels of understanding and that scientists are explorers and thinkers trying to unpack existence in the same way rabbis try to unpack God and Torah! So, he asks, what happens should there be a conflict between the words of Torah and the findings of science? He answers himself and says, the problem is not with science, and the problem is not with Torah - the problem is with us as limited interpreters of the two. He demands that we honor God and rationality and reason and science. He demands that we not diminish God into a cruel, useless entity as we make sad excuses for why God can't fit into all the false descriptions we create. He demands that we understand certain segments of Torah as metaphorical and symbolic. God freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm? The ONLY way to read that text is as symbolic because, as Nachmanides so succinctly puts it, to read it literally would be to commit a *chilul HaShem*, a condemnation of God's name. God has no corporeal form and cannot be contained into such, so obviously, these great rabbis teach, there are significant moments of Torah that must be understood as poetry and not as physics, as metaphor and not as history. Coming back then to our seven days of creation, understanding that we cannot create theologies that run counter to reality, how should we understand these seven days? As seven 24-hour periods? As an actual week? No. Not as literal. Not as history. Not as a lie that displaces science. It is a prosaic poem meant to convey theology and philosophy, not math and science. While it might seem bizarre to some in the room that I'm actually addressing the need to read Torah through the lens of poetry and metaphor, I ask us to acknowledge tonight that there is a war on science in our country and it runs counter to two millennia of Jewish thought and wisdom. When anti-science activists demand that actual science be taught as a theory alongside

the bible as another equally valid theory of existence, we run the risk of turning the clock backwards on human development, learning, wisdom, truth, and destroying the name of God in the process.

So what can we learn about science and our obligation to this physical world from Parshat Bereishit? Perhaps most importantly, we can see that our ancient ancestors understood that this world and its diversity and bounty are a profound gift of existence. Torah tells us five times that this planet and its creatures are good. Our entire calendar year is centered around three major festivals all of which are connected to living in seasonal gratitude for the most important and basic of blessings - the bounty of our harvests and having enough food to survive another season. Humanity's goodness is only determined in relationship to how we govern, how we maintain and how we rule over this beautiful world with which we have been entrusted. There are those who interpret and abuse our sacred text to say that the word "dominion" gives humanity license to use and abuse with impunity. There are theologians who speculate that our job is to abuse and use up the resources of this amazing world so that we can hasten the coming of the Messiah. No where in Torah are we given permission to harm this planet. Over and over again in our sacred texts our tradition teaches the idea that the earth and everything on it has its own relationship to and with God and that there is accountability. When the prophet Jonah finally fulfills his obligation to warn the city of Nineveh that they face imminent destruction, he wanders despondent from the city and collapses in the open under the sun. The story tells us that God causes a vine to grow that offers him shade. During the night, God then sends a worm to eat the vine and Jonah is beside himself with grief. God then shames Jonah and his blindness to the suffering around him. In the words of the text God admonishes his saying, you mourn for this plant which for which you did nothing to cultivate or make grow but not for an entire city of tens of thousands of people and also livestock? While commentators traditionally focus on the human element of the story and Jonah's reluctance as a petulant prophet, the text itself offers us an insight into the concern God feels, not just for humanity, but for the animals who live along side us and who will suffer profoundly because of human iniquity.

To have dominion does not mean to have the right to abuse. On the contrary, to have dominion is to mimic God's dominion. To know each grain of sand and its importance, to know each blade of grass and its brilliance, to care sincerely and protectively and proactively for the people who inhabit each city and the animals who live along side sharing this world. Parents have dominion over their children. This means they have an obligation to nurture, protect, guide, govern, and grow. Our obligation to this planet and all of its creatures is no less.

And just in case we're thinking that Parshat Bereishit is an anomaly, Torah immediately goes into the story of Noach. Between Bereishit and Noach, we see the deeply ingrained mitzvot of caring for creatures and the profound harm we cause when we act as poor governors. It was human conduct that led to the profound devastation of the flood. Again, I do not suggest tonight that we begin the year of 5778 by embracing a literal interpretation of Torah and fundamentalism. I do however, suggest we look at the themes of Torah and the truths of these stories. Torah describes for us a world in which a normal function of the planet, in this case rain, is magnified, and exacerbated by human action. Torah describes it as being brought about by an angry God but through the mystical lens and our modern lens, we can appreciate the symbolism of this story - that human activity can cause profound levels of destruction and devastation, not just to other humans but to all the creatures who reside on this planet with us.

Later in Parshat Noach, we read the reiteration that we are to have dominion over the earth and its creatures but even the animals have rights. People are prohibited from eating from

an animal who is still alive. In Parshat Noach we read about the covenant God creates that includes the promise to never flood the earth and cause wholesale destruction again. This covenant is made with the whole of humanity AND with all the animals and creatures of the world. Think for a moment of the magnitude of that statement - God, in Torah makes a covenant, a sacred contract with the animals of this planet; with the mosquitos, with the crocodiles, and of course with all the dogs and cats. But we can't allow ourselves to forget - this is a contract between two parties. In it, we agree to care for this planet, to value each and every person, to care for the animals and all the creepy crawlies. In other words, in exchange for protection, we have obligations and it doesn't take long to look at our world today to see that we are failing terribly as protectors and stewards.

We use and abuse this planet and her creatures as though there are no long-term consequences to our carelessness and our thoughtlessness. We do irreversible harm as though this planet and her inhabitants don't have a right to exist in wellness. And when we do take tiny steps forward to reduce our harm, so many people raise their voices and decry the inconvenience of it all. And worse than decrying the inconvenience of environmentalism is the unwillingness to hear the words of our scientists and researchers who are warning us en-masse that climate change is real, that it is being rapidly exacerbated by human activity, and that we have got to change the way we live on this planet or this planet will become an inhospitable environment for our continued survival. How many once-in-a-lifetime floods do we have to witness before we get serious about greenhouse gasses? How many record-record setting fires will it take to get serious about land management? How much of Yosemite has to die off and how many farm wells have to run dry before we get serious about long-term water management and water reclamation? How many bee colonies have to collapse before we recognize that without our bees there is no food for the billions of people on this planet and how quickly do the ice-caps have to melt before we acknowledge rising sea levels? We are standing on the edge of a precipice we are still arguing about whether or not it's actually a precipice.

When we ignore the work of our scientists we are abandoning God's truth and God's given wisdom. God and eons of evolution have endowed us as a species with the ability to think, to decide, to love, to fight, to make choices that run counter to our own convenience and comfort and what are we doing with all this wisdom? We have committed the sin of tolerating false equivalencies, of allowing people to challenge math, science, honesty and scientific integrity, to use faulty logic and to insist that nine plus nine is obviously 99. In a fabulous tweet responding to the idea that climate change was the result of a massive conspiracy of scientists, astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson responded that anyone who thinks that scientists would willingly agree with each other, has never been to a science conference. Debasing and devaluing an entire field of study which subjects itself to the standards of demonstrable research, corroborating research and peer review just because we don't like what they're saying is an act which demeans of all humanity. When Torah tells us that we are made in the image of God, it's not in corporeal image because, as our rabbis and mystics have already reminded us, God has no corporeal form. So how is it that we're created in the Divine Image? One answer our tradition offers us is that it's in our ability to make choices, in our ability to learn and grow and to strive to be better.

We can and we must do better than we are. The great Bachya ibn Pakudah, an 11th century rabbi philosopher tells us, "Days are like scrolls, write on them what you will." He offers us a profound invitation to consider what we want to write, not just for ourselves but for our families, our communities, our world and this generation. One in three children in the Vaholempa region of El Salvador dies before the age of 14 from liver failure because of the

poison in their ground water which is a residual from decades of intensive cotton production pesticides. Flint Michigan has hundreds of families that still don't have safe drinking water because of the heavy metals in their pipes. People are drowning to death and thousands have lost their homes in catastrophic floods that are now happening seasonally. And like an organism sick with a fever, the planet keeps getting warmer. Every year, our our country, and our leaders keep kicking the can down the road because no one wants to acknowledge the enormity of the task of healing our planet and coming into a healthy and good relationship with our home in the cosmos. So this year, as we sit in meditation and reflection in our High Holy Day services, as we come to hold ourselves and God accountable for the state of the world, we cannot forget about this planet's most fragile aspects and voiceless citizens. We cannot keep pretending that things are not as serious as they are. For years, at Camp Swig when I used to take campers camping and hiking, I used to instruct my students with the wisdom I had learned from one of my camp rabbis. He said we should never turn our back on the mountain or forget for one moment to show respect and pay proper attention because he said, the minute that we do, is the minute the mountain will remind us who is bigger and who is in charge. Friends, I say the same words of wisdom to us tonight. We cannot turn our backs on our planet and on our scientists who help us understand our world and our universe. Torah begs us to be in healthy relationship with both. Torah warns us of the dire consequences when these relationships lose their balance and their priority . And the vital thing to know is that it's not too late. It's not too late to turn the tide. It's not too late to demand that our government and our elected officials pay attention to the recommendations of our scientist and act in accordance with their expertise and wisdom. It's not too late to demand that our schools and our school districts teach actual science and not offer the bible as a second and equally valid competing theory. It's not too late to demand better protection for all of the creatures with whose well-being we are charged to ensure their safety, their vibrancy and their rightful ability to co-exists with humanity. It's not too late to demand better resource management from our governing bodies in order to ensure the planet's safety, the animals' safety and the people's safety. Yes, it's more work and yes it's expensive but the cost of ignoring our obligations is so much more severe.

My friends, may we be inspired by Bachya ibn Pakudah on this eve of the new year of 5778 to write for ourselves and our children a scroll that is filled with a celebration of the human mind and our God given talents and creativity to heal our home. May we be inspired to accept our role as God's partners in being good and faithful stewards over this planet and her inhabitants. May we exercise the kind of dominion over nature and creature in a manner that reflects our understanding of what it is to be a good and loving parent; in a manner that reflects the way we would like God to demonstrate dominion over this world. May we be courageous and unceasing in our opposition to those who would seek to silence science and truth. In 5778, may we recognize the rare and precious beauty that is our lives and our cosmic home and may we fight to keep her and all of her inhabitants safe. Shanah Tovah.